

El Dorado Holdings

Dennis Krahn and Mike Reinbold, principals of El Dorado Holdings, talk about the economic benefits that Villages at Vigneto, a 28,000-home development planned for Benson, is expected to bring the region during a meeting on Friday at the News-Sun office.

BENSON — Economists expect Villages at Vigneto, the 28,000-home development planned for Benson, to bring an estimated boost of \$24 billion to the region's economy.

Principals of El Dorado Holdings Inc., were in Benson Friday to meet with members of the community where they provided an update about the development's progress as well as its projected economic impact, which includes 16,000 local and regional jobs at the peak of construction and more than 8,500 permanent jobs after the project is fully developed.

Organized by Southeast Arizona Economic Development Group, about three-dozen members of the community were invited to the meeting, presented by Mike Reinbold of El Dorado Holdings along with Robert Carreira, director of Cochise College Center for Economic Research. Carreira has been commissioned by El Dorado Benson, LLC to research and compile an economic impact report, with Carreira's preliminary findings presented at Friday's meeting.

With an estimated \$24 billion economic impact over the course of an 18 year build-out, the development is expected to provide about 2,000 homes a year at its peak from 2020 to 2031, dropping to 1,000 homes in 2032, the final year of construction.

"If we look at the main plan, the 2,000 homes per year, this would certainly transform the economy of Benson as well as Cochise County," said Carreira. "This would be the biggest thing going on in Cochise County."

Carreira believes the majority of new jobs will remain in Cochise County. In addition, he says the long-term presence of the new community will create permanent jobs, relieving some of the stress of the county's struggling economy. He also touched on the economic impact job losses at Fort Huachuca have created for the area.

While Carreria emphasizes Fort Huachuca's role in this region as an economic driver, he expects the development will help to alleviate "some of the fears of potential reductions in the size of the base."

Reinbold also spoke of the development's positive economic impacts. In addition to the \$24 billion the project is expected to bring during its build-out, there is a long-term economic boost that will go well beyond the life of the project, said Reinbold.

"This community has the potential for Cochise County to control its own destiny. Our goal is to make this community the hub center for Cochise County."

Despite the expected economic boost, the development has its share of opponents. Objections stem from those with environmental concerns about groundwater pumping and its impacts on the San Pedro

River. Those challenges have caused some delays for the development, but Reinbold expects to break ground sometime in the first half of 2016.

The Audubon Society has requested that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reconsider a 2006 permit issued to the property's former owner Whetstone Ranch Estates. The permit was transferred to El Dorado Holdings in 2014 at the time the developer purchased the property from Whetstone Ranch. Reinbold maintains that the permit has been reviewed by the agency and is valid.

Along with regulatory requirements, Reinbold says the development also presented a preliminary master plan for the community's benefit, something that was not required. He says he loves the area and has taken extra steps to weave a number of water mitigation elements into the development's plan.

Additionally, the 12,300 acres has already been zoned for a 60,000-home project, with El Dorado planning half that number of homes.

A master-planned community with a list of amenities, Villages at Vigneto will have a Tuscan-inspired theme throughout the development, with architectural consistency and will include a town center as a community hub, complete with shops and restaurants.

"We're offering more than a development, we're providing a lifestyle," said Reinbold.

Benson Mayor Toney King says that most of the residents he has spoken to support the project. "None of the environmental groups that are objecting to this development have been able to prove there will be an impact on the San Pedro River," said King. "The improved quality of life this development will bring to Benson and the surrounding region, particularly the economic benefits it will provide, are huge."

"We have a struggling economy right now, and we absolutely cannot afford to pass up this amazing opportunity for Benson and Cochise County."

Plans for the development continue to move forward. On Monday the City of Benson will be considering which of two law firms it could be using for bond counsel when it comes to "public land secured financing" for the Villages at Vigneto.

Two legal firms have requested filling that role. Kutac Rock out of Scottsdale is a firm introduced to the council by Reinbold during a council work session a few months ago as a possible option. Greenberg Traurig is a firm based in Phoenix and has worked with the City of Benson on previous bond matters.

Letter to supporters

After coming up against challenges from environmental groups, the Villages at Vigneto is circulating a letter to supporters, requesting they appeal to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on behalf of the development.

In part, the letter bullets the following list of benefits the development is expected to bring the area.

- High quality residential, retail and commercial uses, offering residents opportunities for social interaction, recreation, employment, dining, shopping, arts and entertainment and a number of other services close to home.
- A water management, conservation, reuse and recharge plan that augments and supports the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) approved designation of adequate water supply issued to the City of Benson more than 15 years ago.
- Water consumption rates similar to Tucson and Phoenix, nationally recognized cities for water consumption practices.

- Abundant open space including natural, undisturbed washes and wildlife corridors with public and neighborhood parks and connecting trails throughout the community.
- More schools, healthcare services and community recreational amenities.
- Upgraded infrastructure.
- Significant, long-term business opportunities for Benson, Cochise County and the region during and after the completion of the project.

Those who want to express opinions about the development can write to:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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